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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to explore the press's power to influence its readers and viewers, a study replicated other agenda-setting research using content analysis of the media and a telephone survey of residents of Defiance, Ohio. Subjects, 364 residents (representing a 45% response rate), were asked to grade the mayor on the best and worst things he had done in the last six months and also asked what media they relied on for information. A content analysis was also conducted on the local newspaper (used by 95% of the respondents) for the six months before the survey. Since the nearest television station is 50 miles away, TV news is nonexistent except for crises. Findings indicated that (1) the coverage of issues correlates with evaluations of the mayor; (2) an issue high on the media agenda could influence the public's evaluation of elected officials; and (3) interpersonal relationships were more important than mass media in setting the community agenda. (Five tables of data are included, and 27 references are appended.) (MS)

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GRADING THE MAYOR: AGENDA-SETTING IN DEFIANCE, OHIO

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GRADING THE MAYOR:
AGENDA-SETTING IN DEFIANCE, OHIO

Research into the agenda-setting function of the press has flourished since the ground-breaking study of the 1968 presidential election in Chapel Hill, N.C., by McCombs and Shaw (1972). Commenting about the dramatic increase of such theory-based research in the 1970s, Roberts and Bachen (1981) suggested it was because the approach asserts the power of the media in conjunction with its simultaneous affirmation of the independence of the individual -- a "promise of both cake and consumption" (p. 328).

Just what is the power of the press to influence its readers and viewers? That question is the thrust of this study. Agenda-setting theorists maintain that the media has some strong but limited powers to influence the audience. By correlating their respondents' choices of the campaign's key issues with the amount of coverage in the various news media they used, Shaw and McCombs (1977) concluded that the mass media set the agenda for political campaigns, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues. Earlier, Carter (1965) had suggested that attitudes were more likely to change when information brought to the forefront of the public's mind certain discriminating attitudes that might enable a person to make a value judgment about a person or issue. McCombs described the chain of effects of exposure to communication (Shaw & McCombs, 1977, p. 4):

Awareness - Information - Attitudes - Behavior

While this process is generally seen by today's researchers more as a system of many intertwining variables than as a chain (Graber, 1987;

Smith, 1987), the Chapel Hill study changed the focus of research from just attitudes to the earlier variables of awareness and information.

But since information gain does not always lead to attitude or behavior change (i.e.: Grunig & Ipes, 1983), the challenge for agenda-setting research is to discover just when and how agenda-setting influences attitudes and opinions. To that aim, researchers have tested the theory under various situations. Studies on interest and media use (Becker, Sobowale, & Casey Jr.,1979; Chaffee & Wilson, 1977; Payne & Caron, 1983) point up the interplay between variables in determining agenda-setting effects. Most studies have dealt with election campaigns (Gadziala & Becker, 1983; Graber, 1974; Grainey, Pollack & Kusmierak, 1984; McLeod, Bybee & Durall, 1979; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Shaw & McCombs, 1977; Stone & McCombs, 1981; Weaver, Graber, McCombs & Eyal, 1981; Williams, Shapiro & Cutbirth, 1983), generally presidential elections. But some have focused on local community issues (Cook et al, 1983; Protess, Leff, Brooks & Gordon, 1985; Sohn, 1978; Watt & van den Berg, 1981). Studies have had more positive findings in large cities than in small, although Sohn (1984) found media coverage about new mines to be sunk in a small West Virginia community was highly correlated with readers' subsequent attitudes.

There are many influences on the agenda-setting function, and studies have concentrated on various aspects of the system. Several such variables were studied by Palmgreen and Clarke (1977) in a look at national and local issues as voiced by Toledo, Ohio, residents. They probed the hypothesis that agenda-setting would be weaker at

the local level than at the national because of such contingent conditions as a person's need for orientation, the frequency of interpersonal discussions about the issues, the level of media exposure and the person's voting decision state (decided or undecided). Since local issues may inspire personal concern and participation, since local interpersonal communication networks are stronger than national, and because national issues tend to get heavier media coverage, Palmgreen and Clarke anticipated less agenda-setting effect on the local level. They found this to be true. This contrasts with Sohn's finding of strong support for agenda-setting in a local level.

"Sheer media exposure" was found by Davidson and Parker to be "the largest correlate of the public's support for Congress" and so they speculated that "perhaps it is not the content of the media messages, but simply the fact of extensive coverage that elevates the standing of government institutions" (Weaver, 1984, p. 688). Finding evidence along the same lines was Mazur, who reported a negative correlation in a study of magazine coverage and public opinion about fluoridation and nuclear power, so that media attention elicited negative public opinion. (Weaver, op. cit.)

The standards people use to judge elected officials can be determined by the media, according to a study by Iyendar, Peters, and Kinder (1983). They found strong support for agenda-setting in two experiments testing television news coverage and evaluations of the president, and concluded that "the media's agenda does seem to alter the standards people use in evaluating the president" (p. 82). This is reminiscent of Lazarsfeld and Merton's suggestion that the

mass media confer status on those in the press; that by giving a person, opinion, issue or group time and space in the media, they are legitimized as being significant enough to require public notice (Klapper, 1960).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Through a survey of residents in an Ohio city of about 17,000, this study tested the power of the local newspaper to influence evaluations of the city's highest elected official, the mayor, in a non-campaign situation. This project looked at Defiance, Ohio, where the hometown newspaper, The Crescent-News, by lack of competition is the dominant media source for city news. The paper is subscribed to in more than 85% of the city homes, and covers city news fully. Radio news constitutes not much more than weather reports and headline coverage of one or two issues. Television news -- the nearest station is 50 miles to the west or east -- is nonexistent except for crises. In the absence of consistent city news from radio or television, a hometown newspaper could enjoy a powerful hold on its readers' perceptions of city government activities. But even with this near-monopoly on local news, can a local newspaper really influence the public's evaluations of city officials?

The study sought to answer that question through a replication of other agenda-setting research using content analysis of the media and a survey of city residents. Some unique characteristics of the study was the non-campaign nature of the study -- the November election was seven months away and the mayor ran unopposed -- and the method of evaluation -- respondents were asked to give the mayor a grade, A to F. Also, rather than the respondents being asked

what they thought the main issues of the campaign or facing the city were, they were asked to name the best thing the mayor had done in the last six months and the worst thing he had done. Respondents were asked the question in this manner knowing that the press had not framed the issues as political questions -- issues had not been directly linked to the mayor but rather covered as matters of city council, the chamber of commerce or government operations. Williams, Shapiro, and Cutbirth (1983) urged the media to use framing, to make overt and direct links between issues and politicians, in order to assist voters in determining the relevance of issues to a campaign. In a study of the 1980 presidential campaign they found that, contrary to some past agenda-setting assumptions that respondents can consciously or subconsciously make the link between issues and candidates, people need an implicit campaign frame in order to decide relevancy. This study sought to test this assertion.

Taking cues from previous research, it was believed that if there was any relationship, there would be a positive correlation between the amount of space devoted to a topic in the newspaper and the public's evaluation of the mayor when that topic was cited as his "best" thing, a negative correlation when cited as his "worst." It was also expected that most people would not be able to offer a "best" or "worst" thing since the issues had not been "framed" in the newspaper and because it was a non-campaign situation. The lack of other mass media was expected to somewhat counteract the influence of personal experience at the local level so that the amount of

coverage given an issue would be correlated with subsequent evaluations of the mayor.

METHOD

A telephone survey of city residents was conducted in March 1987. The respondents, chosen though random selection from the city phone book in March, were asked to grade the mayor from A to F and to name the best and worst things he had done. They were also asked a variety of demographic and media use questions, and to name the "most important issue facing the city."

The answers were then categorized according to a system combining two studies' methodology. For the issues, Weaver and Elliott (1985, p. 89-90) were followed, eliminating those categories which received no responses in the polls. They conducted an agenda-setting study and categorized the issues cited according to subject matter. The categories used, and examples of issues, in the Defiance study were:

* Building Construction/Land Use -- particular issues included the demolition of the Hoffman Building and the subsequent closing of Fort Street so a new building could be erected next to the river, and renovation of the Senior Center.

* Utilities and Finance -- city and county budget negotiations, water and electric rate hikes.

* Urban Development and Renewal -- downtown renovation through tree plantings and new sidewalks.

* Public Safety -- taking out the downtown parking meters, establishing a curfew, youth delinquency, drunken driving, crime and vandalism, drugs.

* Public Works -- street repairs, leaf and snow removals, land upkeep.

* Economic Investment and Industrial Development -- bringing in the new mall, plans for an industrial park, new business incentives.

* Administrative Actions -- administrator's plan to privatize EMS, city salary negotiations, negotiating the garbage pickup and cable television contracts.

* Election Campaign and Politics -- local judge refuses to run for reelection because campaigning demeans the position.

For image-related characteristics, items which refer more to the personal qualities of the candidate rather than to city issues, the categories devised in a study by Weaver, Graber, McCombs, and Eyal (1981) were used, with these responses typifying each section:

* Affective -- "He's a nice guy," "He's a people person."

* Cognitive -- "His priorities are wrong," "He's wishy-washy."

* Behavioral -- "He cheats on his wife," "I didn't like the way he handled the city salary negotiations."

To study media use and dependency, respondents were asked what media they used -- local paper, out-of-town papers, friends, television, radio, and local cable access channel. They were then asked to rank these sources from 7 as "most important source" to 1 as "least important." The demographics requested included sex, age, income, education, length of time lived in Defiance, whether they were registered voters, and the party with which they felt most closely aligned.

After the polls were conducted, a content analysis of the local newspaper was conducted for the six months before the March survey: October 1, 1986, through March 23, 1987, the day the survey started. The count included inches of coverage found throughout the paper concerning the categories defined as pertinent by receiving mentions by the poll. Inches rather than articles were counted because one story could discuss several issues. The newspaper traditionally ran a city council story prominently on the front page every Wednesday about the Tuesday night meeting, and included within that story or a sidebar all the issues discussed at the meeting. Advertisements and comics were not included, as they were not relevant to the issues voiced in the polls. Also, there were no sports issues mentioned by the respondents.

RESULTS

A total of 364 people were reached in the March poll, with a response rate of 45%. There were 51.6% who had up to and including a high school degree, 41.1% had college up to and including an undergraduate degree, and 7.2% had attended graduate school. Some 35.3% were 18-35 years old, 40.1% were 35-55 years old, and 24.6% were over 55 years old. Most households (44.4%) had yearly incomes of from $20,000 to $40,000, 29.1% under $20,000, and 26.5% over $40,000. There were 34.5% Democrats, 47.1% Republicans, 18.4% independents. Interviewers alternately requested an adult man or woman as a respondent and 45.7% in the poll were men, 54.3% women.[1]

The Crescent-News was used by 95% of the respondents in the poll to learn city news and was ranked a strong #1 among the media

sources, scoring a 6.75 overall (with 7 as "most important source"). Second was friends at 5.24, radio was third at 4.88, then television at 4.03, and other papers at 3.32. When respondents were asked what sources they used for city news, 95% said they used the local paper, 71.3% said they learned city news from friends and business acquaintances; and 65.2% used radio. Most of the respondents claimed to use three or four sources: 8.2% used one source,15.4% used two, 29.2% used three, 25.6% used four, 13.1% used five, 7.2% used six, and 1.3% used seven.

Evaluating the Mayor

Defiance's Mayor Thomas Wiseman received an overall B in poll. The breakdown of grades was:

TABLE 1
Breakdown of Mayor's 2.78 Grade Point Average

Grade	Percentage of Total
F (0 points)	2.5%
D (1 point)	4.4%
C (2 points)	23.7%
B (3 points)	44.5%
A (4 points)	19.8%
Don't Know	5.0%

n=342

There were no significant differences found in the grade given and whether the respondent was a registered voter, how long they had lived in the city, sex, education, age, or income. Only when controlling for party was there a significant difference. As could be expected, Democrats tended to grade this Democratic mayor higher than Republicans and Independents:

TABLE 2
Effect of Respondents' Party on Mayor's Grade

	Percentages of Total Respondents		
Grade	Democrat	Republican	Independent
D-F	2.3	2.9	2.3
C	7.7	12.9	4.2
B	18.1	22.7	5.8
A	11.0	6.5	3.6

($p < .02$)
n=309

The Issues

Most people in the survey could name no "best" or "worst" thing the mayor had done in the last six months, although few (5%) declined to give him a grade. There were 45.3% in the poll who gave no "best" thing and even poorer response was given the "worst" question: 66% gave no answer:

TABLE 3
"Best" and "Worst" Responses, by Percentage of Total Respondents

Categories	Percentage in poll	
	Best	Worst
Construction	1.7	5.0
Finances	.3	3.9
Urban Renewal	16.1	3.1
Public Safety	1.7	.3
Public Works	.8	2.2
Economy/Industry	10.8	1.7
Administrative Actions	1.9	7.8
Image: Affective	19.2	.3
Image: Cognitive	.6	4.2
Image: Behavior	1.7	4.5
Don't Know	45.3	66.0

n=342

When the responses to the March poll's questions of the "best" and "worst" things the mayor had done were categorized by the amount of space those issues received in the press from October through March 23, some significant differences were found ($p < .05$). Using 100 column inches of copy as the dividing point[2], it was discovered (see Table 4) that those giving the mayor a C, D, or F were more apt to give no "best" thing" than those who gave him an A or B.

TABLE 4
Effect of Amount of Media Coverage (in Inches) on Evaluation of Mayor

BEST Thing Mayor Has Done

Grade	Percentage naming item which received Over 100"	Under 100"	No issue cited
D or F	1.5%	1.5%	4.4%
C	3.8	8.2	12.6
B	8.2	19.6	19.6
A	6.1	7.9	6.7

($p > .05$)

WORST Thing Mayor Has Done

Grade	Percentage naming item which received Over 100"	Under 100"	No issue cited
D or F	2.9%	1.8%	2.6%
C	11.7	2.0	10.8
B	8.6	3.8	35.0
A	2.6	1.5	16.7

($p = .01$)

n=342

When cross-tabulating the grade given and the "worst" thing the mayor had done, as would be expected, people giving Wiseman a C, D, or F were most likely to cite an issue that had received over 100 inches of copy, while those giving him an A or B usually (over 75%) gave no "worst" thing. The reverse was true to a lesser degree. More of those giving him an A cited a "best" issue which had received over

100 inches of copy more often than those giving him a B, but this finding was not significant. In a regression analysis to determine grade based upon answers for the "best" and "worst" things (still using 100 inches of copy as the dividing point), grade was most highly correlated with the "worst" thing, .314, than with the "best", -.159 (see Table 5). While not strong, analyses using different variables turned up even lower correlations.

In cross-lag correlational analysis of the variables, the top four categories of "most important issue facing the city" responses were ranked as to the percentages of the respondents mentioning each as a "best" or "worst" thing the mayor had done, and then correlated with the ranked amount of copy space each received in the paper. While there was a +.8 correlation

TABLE 5
Predictability of Grade based upon Amount of Space Given to Respondent's "Best", "Worst" Choices

	BEST	WORST	GRADE
BEST	1.000	.120	-.159
WORST		1.000	.314
GRADE			1.000

Multiple R = .37065
R square = .13738

VARIABLE	B	Beta	T	SIG T
"WORST"	.006148	.337378	6.630	.0000
"BEST"	-.003498	-.199119	-3.913	.0001
(CONSTANT)	2.569394		32.006	.0000

between the overall coverage and "most important issue" ranking, both "best" and "worst" were negatively correlated with coverage. The strongest correlations for the "best" in the poll was the cumulative months of October through January and October through March, a -.8 correlation for each. For the "worst," -.8 was determined with the cumulative months of October through February. All other accumulations were less than .5.

The rank order of "best" in March was: Economic/Industrial Development, Administrative Actions, Construction, and Utilities and Finance. For the "worst" the order was: Administrative Actions, Construction, Utilities and Finance, and Economic/Industrial Development. Of these issues, the newspaper carried the most copy, 596 inches, on Utilities and Finance. Next was Economic/Industrial Development with 346 inches; then Construction with 332 inches; and Administrative Actions with 307 inches.

DISCUSSION

Does coverage of issues correlate with evaluations of the mayor? The data analysis supported this idea. Coverage over time can make an item salient not only as an important issue but also as one by which to judge the mayor, as suggested by Iyengar, Peters and Kinder (1983). Then does that increased tendency to use the more publicized issues in judging officials create an improved evaluation or a lowered esteem? It was seen that many of the respondents who gave the mayor an A or B cited an issue which had received over 100 inches of copy as the best thing he had done, while those giving him a C, D, or F were more likely to give no answer. Likewise, when

examining the worst thing the mayor had done, it was seen that those giving him a C, D, or F cited an issue receiving over 100 inches of copy. And those who gave the mayor an A or B usually named no "worst thing" he had done.

It would appear, therefore, that an issue high on the media agenda can influence the public's evaluation of elected officials. The salient issue has the opportunity to influence people's judgments, and if they do not like the standing or outcome of that issue, it may cause them to give their elected officials a lower evaluation, even though the official has never been directly linked in the press to the issue. In another test, the regression analysis indicated that what people considered to be the worst thing the mayor had done was more influential in determining his grade than what they considered to be his best thing. Also, more issues -- which as such received coverage in the newspaper -- were mentioned as the worst thing the mayor had done, whereas image characteristics -- which were not covered in the paper -- were often cited as the best thing he had done. With these two factors working together, media coverage appeared to be more negatively related to evaluation of public officials, as Mazur claimed.

This study offered agenda-setting support in an often-neglected size of community, the smaller intermediate city of 17,000, and suggested that even without framing, in a non-campaign situation, residents can pick up cues about issues from the press and link them to elected officials in making an evaluative judgment about the officials. But the high number of respondents giving no response to these evaluative questions -- about 57% overall -- might have been

lessened if the paper had linked issues to officials, as suggested by Williams, Shapiro, and Cutbirth (1983). Precise conclusions cannot be made, however, without further studies into the many variables which exist and intermingle in this size of community. The effect of such non-media influences as first-hand experience, media use, sex, party, income, and influence of friends must also be taken into consideration to fully appreciate the results.

First, it was seen that while the newspaper was by far the most dominant mass media source for city news, interpersonal communication came up next, although a distant second. The mass media of radio and television lagged far behind, as had been expected since they offer very little city news on a consistent basis. There had been no major catastrophes to call attention to Defiance for several months when the survey was taken, so television cameras had not traveled the 50 miles into the city for some time.

This finding reflects research Sohn (1978) did in a small community of a couple thousand people where interpersonal relationships were more important than mass media in setting the community agenda. While the newspaper was the most important here, radio and television were less important to the respondents than their friends and business acquaintances. But as can be pointed out, the fact that media information is passed interpersonally actually reinforces the importance of mass media rather than overriding it, since even those who don't read the paper can have access to the information through interpersonal sources. It would be beneficial to study the dynamics of this level of communication in a community that relies as heavily as this one upon the newspaper for city news.

Another indication of the possible power of interpersonal communication was the large number --19% -- of the respondents who offered an "Affective Image" response when asked to name the best thing the mayor had done. The most common responses in this category were "He's a nice guy" and "He's a people person." These are impressions one probably gets more from personal meetings with the official and from friends who know him than from the pages of the local newspaper. Still, some respondents mentioned seeing him in the paper a lot, as a guest at various community functions, and then concluded that he was a "people person." Deeper probing of this issue is called for. A similar issue which should be studied is the fact that while those naming the "best" thing offered an image characteristic more often than any particular issue (although overall there were more issues mentioned than image characteristics), those giving "worst" things cited far fewer image characteristics, just 9% for all three image categories. Issues were by far the most cited examples of "worst" things. Since there were strong correlations between the amount of coverage given these issues and respondents' negative evaluations of the mayor, this finding offers additional support for the power of the press to influence readers' attitudes about city officials.

To conclude, this study points up the possibility of interesting political communication research in often-ignored communities with limited choice of mass media news sources. Further studies should include more intense probes of why people picked the issues they did in responding to the "best" and "worst" things the mayor had done; what issues they chose not to mention; with whom they discussed

community events and issues; and their social and civic interactions. Research is needed to discover more about these kind of people -- people who spend most of their lives in the same community, who feel the city is small enough for them to have some control but large enough to offer most of the comforts of a metropolitan area. Their perceptions of the relationship between interpersonal communication and mass media may offer new insights into the role of the press in society.

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END NOTES

[1] The 1980 Census data was examined to compare demographics. In sex, the census was nearly identical to the March survey -- 48.2% men, 51.8% women. On education, the survey had more college graduates than the Census reported -- 70.8% with up to and including a high school degree, 29.2% with some college education, up to a Ph.D. For age, there were more respondents in the18-35 year-old bracket than in the Census data -- 45.7% 18-35 years old, 26.5% 35-55 years old, and 27.8% 55 years and older. The survey also had more respondents in the over $40,000 bracket than the census reported -- 53.1% under $20,000, 37.6% with $20,000-$40,000, and 9.3% over $40,000. Party registration for the May 1984 primary showed that of those 4,264 registered voters professing a party, 53.6% were Republicans and 46.8% Democrats. However, many people voted without having voted in a party's primary for four years and were so labeled Independents, according to the Director of the Defiance County Board of Elections. So of the 9,190 registered voters. there were actually 53.6% Independents, 24.7% Republicans, and 21.7% Democrats.

[2] This breaking point of 100 column inches was used because after conducting the content analysis, it was revealed that about half the categories fell above 100 inches, about half below. Using a higher or lower figure created problems with getting expected cell frequencies above five, necessary for valid cross-tabulations.